

CHARLESTON BUDDHIST FELLOWSHIP

A BUDDHIST CATECHISM



Prepared by

Allan R. Bomhard

Based upon original work by

Henry Steel Olcott (1832—1907)

Basic / Introductory Series

A Buddhist Catechism

PREPARED BY

Allan R. Bomhard

BASED UPON ORIGINAL WORK BY

Henry Steel Olcott
(1832—1907)



CHARLESTON BUDDHIST FELLOWSHIP
Charleston, SC USA

2014 (2558)

The doctrinal positions expressed in this book are those of Theravādin Buddhism.

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship edition of this work is intended exclusively for use in private study and is not intended for publication or resale. It is printed for free distribution and may be copied or reprinted for free distribution, in total or in part, without written permission.



A BUDDHIST CATECHISM

1. (Q) What is your religion?
(A) Buddhism.

The word “religion” is inappropriate when applied to Buddhism, which is not a religion, but a moral and philosophical system that expounds a unique path to enlightenment and is not a subject to be studied from a mere academic standpoint. By common usage, the term “Buddhism” has been applied to this system. The Buddhists of Southeast Asia have never had any conception of what Jews, Christians, and Moslems imply by the term “religion”.

2. (Q) Who or what is a Buddhist?
(A) A Buddhist is one who follows and who puts into practice the teachings of the Buddha.

All Buddhists are expected to lead a noble and useful life.

3. (Q) Was the Buddha a God?
(A) No.
4. (Q) Was the Buddha a human being?
(A) Outwardly, the Buddha looked like any other man. Internally, however, He was not like other men. In moral and mental qualities, He far surpassed all other men of His own and subsequent times.
5. (Q) Was “Buddha” His name?
(A) No. “Buddha” is the name of a condition or state of mind.
6. (Q) What is its meaning?
(A) “Buddha” means “Enlightened” — one who has perfect wisdom.
7. (Q) What was the Buddha’s real name then?
(A) Siddhattha was His royal name, and Gotama was His family name. He was born a prince of the Sākya clan.

In Sanskrit, His name is rendered Siddhārtha Gautama.

8. (Q) Who were his father and mother?
(A) King Suddhodana and Queen Māyā. His mother died seven days after He was born, and He was raised by His stepmother, Queen Pajāpatī Gotamī.

9. (Q) What people did King Suddhodana rule over?
(A) The Sākyas, an Aryan tribe.

The kingdom of the Sākyas was located on the borders of modern-day Nepal and India. The capital city was Kapilavatthu.

10. (Q) Where was Kapilavatthu?
(A) About a hundred miles northeast of the Indian city of Vārāṇasī (Benares) and about forty miles from the Himalaya mountains.

11. (Q) Was the Sākya Kingdom situated near a river?
(A) Yes. The Rohiṇī River separated the Sākya Kingdom from that of the Koliyans.

12. (Q) When was Prince Siddhattha born?
(A) The traditional date is 623 BCE.

Though the exact date of Prince Siddhattha's birth has been disputed, recent excavations at Lumbinī (His birthplace) tend to confirm the traditional date.

13. (Q) Did Prince Siddhattha have luxuries and privileges like other princes?
(A) Yes, He did. His father, King Suddhodana, built three magnificent palaces, one for each of the Indian seasons — one for the cold season, one for the hot season, and one for the rainy season. One palace had three stories, another had five stories, and the last had nine stories, all of which were exquisitely decorated. He wore the finest clothes. Many beautiful maidens, skilled in dancing and music, were in continual attendance to amuse Him.

14. (Q) Was He married?
(A) Yes. When He was sixteen years old, He married Princess Yasodharā, the daughter of King Suprabuddha.

15. (Q) How, amid all this luxury, could a prince become all-wise?
(A) He had such a natural learning ability that, when He was a child, He seemed to understand all arts and sciences almost without study. He had the best teachers, but they could teach Him nothing that He did not seem immediately to comprehend.

16. (Q) Did He become Buddha in His splendid palaces?
(A) No. He left the luxury of the palaces behind and went alone into the jungle.

17. (Q) Why did He do this?
(A) To discover the cause of the sufferings of sickness, old age, and death, and the way to escape them.

-
18. (Q) Was it selfishness that motivated Him to do this?
(A) No. It was boundless compassion for all beings that motivated Him.
19. (Q) What did He give up in order to do this?
(A) He gave up His beautiful palaces, His riches, His luxuries, His pleasures, His soft beds, His fine clothes, His rich food, His kingdom. He even left His beloved wife and their only son.
20. (Q) What was His son's name?
(A) Prince Rāhula.
21. (Q) Did any other person ever give up so much out of compassion for others?
(A) Not one. This is why His followers revere Him so much and why they try to be like Him.
22. (Q) How old was He when He went to the jungle?
(A) He was twenty-nine years old.
23. (Q) What finally motivated Him to leave all behind and go to the jungle?
(A) Four sights appeared to Him on four different occasions when He was riding outside the palace walls in His chariot.
24. (Q) What were these four sights?
(A) (1) An decrepit old man; (2) a sick man; (3) a corpse; and (4) a dignified ascetic.
25. (Q) Did He alone see these sights?
(A) No. His attendant, Channa, also saw them.
26. (Q) Why should these sights, so familiar to everyone, have caused Him to go to the jungle?
(A) We often see such sights. He had not, and they made a deep impression on His mind.
27. (Q) Why had He not also seen them?
(A) The astrologers had foretold at His birth that Prince Siddhattha would one day renounce His kingdom and become a Buddha. The King, His father, wishing not to lose his son, had carefully prevented Him from seeing any sights that might suggest to Him human misery and death. No one was even allowed to speak of such things to the Prince. He was almost like a prisoner in His palaces and flower gardens. They were surrounded by high walls, and everything inside of those walls was made as beautiful as possible, so that He would not want to go out and see the sorrow and distress that are in the world.
28. (Q) Was He so kind-hearted that His father feared He might really want to renounce His kingdom out of compassion for the suffering of others?
(A) Yes. Even in his youth, He seems to have felt a strong sense of compassion, empathy, and love for others.

29. (Q) And how did He expect to learn the cause of suffering in the jungle?
(A) By removing Himself far away from everything that could distract Him from deeply contemplating the cause of suffering.
30. (Q) How did He escape from the palace?
(A) One night, when all were asleep, He arose, took a last look at His sleeping wife and infant son, summoned Channa, mounted His favorite horse, Kanthaka, and quietly rode beyond the palace gates.
31. (Q) But the gates were locked, were they not?
(A) Yes. But He managed to open the gates without the slightest noise and rode away into the darkness.
32. (Q) Where did He go?
(A) To the River Anomā, a long way from Kapilavatthu.
33. (Q) What did He do then?
(A) He dismounted from His horse, cut off His hair with His sword, and, giving His fine clothes, royal jewelry, and horse to Channa, ordered him to take them back to His father, the King.
34. (Q) What then?
(A) He went on foot to Rājagaha, the capital city of Magadha.
35. (Q) Why there?
(A) There were renowned ascetics in the jungle of Uruvelā, very wise men, whose pupil He afterwards became, in the hope of finding the knowledge He was searching for.
36. (Q) Which religion did they follow?
(A) They followed Brahmanism, an early form of Hinduism.
37. (Q) What did they teach?
(A) That by severe penances and torture of the body, a man might acquire perfect wisdom.
38. (Q) Did Prince Siddhattha find this to be so?
(A) No. He mastered their teachings, but the systems taught by these ascetics did not lead to the answers He was looking for.
39. (Q) What did He do then?
(A) He bid farewell to these teachers and went to a forest near a place called Bodhgaya, where He spent several years in deep meditation and fasting.
40. (Q) Was He alone?
(A) No. Five companions also renounced the world and joined Him.

41. (Q) What were their names?
(A) Koṇḍañña, Bhaddiya, Vappa, Mahānāma, and Assaji.
42. (Q) What plan of discipline did He adopt to open His mind to the truth?
(A) He sat and meditated, shutting out from His sight and hearing all that was likely to disturb His inward reflections.
43. (Q) Did He fast?
(A) Yes — throughout the whole period. He took less and less food and water until, it is said, He ate scarcely more than one grain of rice or sesame seed a day.
44. (Q) Did this give Him the wisdom He was searching for?
(A) No. He grew thinner and thinner in body and weaker in strength, until, one day, as He was slowly walking back and forth meditating, He was so debilitated that He fell to the ground unconscious.
45. (Q) What did His ascetic companions think?
(A) They thought He was dead, but after a time, He revived.
46. (Q) What then?
(A) Finally, He saw that the answers He sought could never be realized by mere fasting or bodily mortifications; that they must be realized, instead, by opening the mind. He had just barely escaped death from starvation but had not obtained perfect wisdom. Therefore, He decided to eat, so that He might live at least long enough to gain wisdom. He received some food offered by a nobleman's daughter who saw Him lying at the foot of a tree. After eating, His strength returned to Him. He then arose and went into the jungle. At that point, His five ascetic companions abandoned Him, thinking that He had given up His quest and returned to a life of luxury.
47. (Q) What did He do there?
(A) In the evening, He went to the foot of a banyan tree.
48. (Q) What did He do there?
(A) He sat down and resolved not to leave the spot until He had attained Buddhahood.
49. (Q) At which side of the tree did He seat Himself?
(A) The side facing east.

No reason is given in the canonical books for the choice of this side of the tree.

50. (Q) What happened that night?
(A) He obtained the knowledge of His previous births, of the causes of rebirth, and of the way to extinguish mental defilements. Just before daybreak, His mind was entirely open, and the light of supreme knowledge — the full understanding of the Four Noble Truths — poured in upon Him. Thereupon, He became Buddha, the Enlightened One.

51. (Q) Had He at last discovered the cause of human suffering?
(A) Yes, at long last, He had. As the light of the morning sun chases away the darkness of night and reveals to sight all visible things, so the full light of knowledge arose in His mind, and He saw the full scope of suffering, of its cause, of its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation.
52. (Q) Did He experience great struggles before gaining this perfect wisdom?
(A) Yes, He experienced mighty and terrible struggles. He had to conquer in His body all those natural defects and human fears, desires, and mental obstructions that prevent us from seeing the truth. He had to overcome all the harmful influences of the world around Him. Like a soldier fighting desperately in battle against many enemies, He struggled. Like an Olympic champion who overcomes every obstacle, He achieved His goal, and the secret of human suffering was uncovered.
53. (Q) Can you tell me briefly what is that secret?
(A) Craving coupled with ignorance.
54. (Q) Can you tell me the remedy?
(A) To dispel ignorance and become wise.
55. (Q) Why does ignorance cause suffering?
(A) Because it makes us prize what is not worth prizing, grieve for what we should not grieve for, consider real what is not real but only illusory, and pass our lives in the pursuit of worthless objects, neglecting what is, in reality, most valuable.
56. (Q) And what is it that is most valuable?
(A) To know the whole truth of man's existence and destiny so that we may have a proper understanding of life in all its aspects; so that we may live in a way that ensures the greatest happiness and the least suffering for our fellow beings and for ourselves.
57. (Q) What is the light that can dispel this ignorance and remove suffering?
(A) The proper understanding of the "Four Noble Truths", as the Buddha called them.
58. (Q) What are these Four Noble Truths?
(A) They are:
1. The first truth, about the universality of suffering, teaches, in short, that all forms of existence are uncertain, transient, contingent, and devoid of intrinsic self-identity and are, therefore, by their very nature subject to suffering.
 2. The second truth, about the origin of suffering, teaches that all suffering is rooted in selfish craving and ignorance. It further explains the cause of this seeming injustice in nature by teaching that nothing in the world can come into existence without a reason or a cause and that, not only all our latent tendencies, but our whole destiny, all weal and woe, results from causes that can be traced partly in this life and partly in former states of existence. The second truth further teaches us that the future life, with all its weal and woe, must result from the seeds sown in this life and in former lives.

3. The third truth, or the truth about the cessation of suffering, shows how, through the abandoning of craving and ignorance, all suffering will vanish, and liberation from cyclic existence will be attained.
 4. The fourth truth shows the way or the means by which this goal is to be reached. It is the Noble Eightfold Path of Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.
59. (Q) What are some of the things that cause suffering?
(A) Birth, sickness, old age, death, separation from people and things that we like, being in the company of people and things that we dislike, craving for what cannot be obtained.
60. (Q) Are these individual peculiarities?
(A) Yes, and they differ with each individual. But all encounter them to some degree and suffer from them.
61. (Q) How can we escape the sufferings which result from unfulfilled desires and ignorant cravings?
(A) By the complete destruction of this unceasing thirst for life and its illusory pleasures, which cause pain and sorrow.
62. (Q) How can we achieve this goal?
(A) By scrupulously following the Noble Eightfold Path, which the Buddha discovered and taught.
63. (Q) What is this Noble Eightfold Path?
(A) The eight stages of this Path are as follows:
1. The first stage of the Noble Eightfold Path is Right Understanding, that is, to view in accordance with reality suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the way leading to the cessation of suffering. This leads to an understanding of the true nature of existence and of the moral laws governing the same. In other words, it is the right understanding of the Dhamma, of the Four Noble Truths.
 2. The second stage of the Noble Eightfold Path is Right Thought (Right Intention), that is, thoughts of renunciation, free from craving, of good will, free from aversion, and of compassion, free from cruelty. This leads to a pure and balanced state of mind, free from sensual lust, ill will, and cruelty.
 3. The third stage is Right Speech. It consists in abstinence from false speech, malicious speech, harsh speech, and useless speech. In other words, right speech is speech that is not false, not harsh, not scandalous, not frivolous, that is, it consists of speech that is truthful, mild, pacifying, gentle, and wise.
 4. The fourth stage is Right Action, that is, abstaining from intentional killing or harming any living creature, abstaining from taking what is not freely given, abstaining from sexual misconduct (adultery, rape, and seduction), and abstaining from intoxicating drinks and drugs causing heedlessness.
 5. The fifth stage is Right Livelihood: giving up wrong livelihood, one earns one's living by a right form of livelihood, that is, from a livelihood that does not bring harm and

suffering to other beings (avoiding soothsaying, trickery, dishonesty, usury, and trading in weapons, meat, living beings, intoxicants, or poison).

6. The sixth stage is Right Effort. It is the fourfold effort to put forth the energy, to prod the mind, and to struggle:
 - a. To prevent unarisen unwholesome mental states from arising;
 - b. To abandon unwholesome mental states that have already arisen;
 - c. To develop wholesome mental states that have not yet arisen;
 - d. To maintain and perfect wholesome mental states that have already arisen.

In other words, it is the fourfold effort that we make to overcome and avoid fresh bad actions by body, speech, and mind; and the effort that we make in developing fresh actions of righteousness, inner peace, and wisdom, and in cultivating them to perfection.

7. The seventh stage is Right Mindfulness, or alertness of mind. It consists of abiding self-possessed and attentive, contemplating according to reality:
 - a. The body;
 - b. Feelings;
 - c. The state of the mind;
 - d. The contents of the mind;

seeing all as composite, ever-becoming, impermanent, and subject to decay. It is maintaining ever-ready mental clarity no matter what we are doing, speaking, or thinking and in keeping before our mind the realities of existence, that is, the impermanence, unsatisfactory nature, and egolessness of all forms of existence.

8. The eighth stage is Right Concentration of mind. It consists of gaining one-pointedness of mind and entering into and abiding in the four fine-material absorptions and the four immaterial absorptions. Such a kind of mental concentration is one that is directed towards a morally wholesome object and always bound up with Right Thought, Right Effort, and Right Mindfulness.

This liberating Eightfold Path is a path of inner training, inner progress. The person who puts these stages into practice will be on the path that leads to the cessation of suffering and to liberation.

64. (Q) Liberation from what?
(A) Liberation from the vicissitudes of existence and of rebirths, all of which are due to craving coupled with ignorance.
65. (Q) And when this liberation is attained, what do we reach?
(A) *Nibbāna*.

This is better known in its Sanskrit form: *nirvāṇa*.

66. (Q) What is *nibbāna*?
 (A) The end of suffering, perfect peace, the cessation of craving, the absence of ignorance. Before reaching *nibbāna*, man is constantly being reborn; upon reaching *nibbāna*, he is no longer reborn.
67. (Q) What causes us to be reborn?
 (A) The unsatisfied desire for things that belong to the state of personal existence in the material world. This unquenched thirst for physical existence is a powerful force that is, in itself, so strong that it draws us back again and again into worldly existence.
68. (Q) Are our rebirths in any way affected by the nature of our unsatisfied desires?
 (A) Yes — and by our individual merits or demerits.
69. (Q) Do our merits or demerits control the state, condition, or form in which we are reborn?
 (A) Yes, they do. In very simple terms, an excess of merit means that we will be more likely to be well and happy in the next life, while an excess of demerit means that we will be more likely to be sickly and unhappy in the next life. This is called the law of *kamma*.
- This is better known in its Sanskrit form: *karma*.
70. (Q) Is this Buddhist doctrine supported or denied by the findings of modern science?
 (A) It is in agreement with science to the extent that it is the law of cause and effect.
71. (Q) Are there any further agreements between Buddhism and science?
 (A) The Buddha taught that there were many progenitors of the human race. Science also explains that man is the result of gradual development.
72. (Q) What is this scientific theory called?
 (A) Evolution. It is sometimes also called “Darwinism”.
73. (Q) What does the law of *kamma* explain?
 (A) It explains the principle of differentiation among men. It accounts for our personality, individuality, character; our likes and dislikes; our fears and phobias; our abilities and disabilities.
74. (Q) What is the relationship between *kamma* and rebirth?
 (A) The nature of rebirth is controlled by the *kamma* — the preponderance of merit or demerit — of the previous existence. Due to their accumulated *kamma*, some beings reach perfection most quickly, some less quickly, and some least quickly.
75. (Q) Does this mean that there are those who are born with a greater capacity for the rapid attainment of wisdom than others?
 (A) Yes. There are those who have surpassed others in moral development and who, in some future birth, are destined to appear on Earth as a Buddha. Such beings are known as “Bodhisattvas”.

76. (Q) What is a Bodhisattva?

(A) One who is striving to attain Buddhahood. Out of the benevolent desire to alleviate the suffering of others, these individuals have devoted many lifetimes to their own moral development so that they can help others by teaching them the cause of suffering and the means to escape from it.

The Pāḷi equivalent is *Bodhisatta*.

In the Pāḷi scriptures and commentaries, the term “Bodhisatta” is given only to Prince Siddhattha before His enlightenment and to His former existences. Bodhisattahood is neither mentioned nor recommended as an ideal higher than or alternative to Arahatsip, nor is there any record in the Pāḷi scriptures of a disciple declaring it to be his aspiration.

The so-called “Bodhisattva Ideal” plays an enormous role in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Furthermore, Mahāyāna Buddhism has created a whole host of mythical Bodhisattvas. Mahāyāna Buddhism also places great importance on the performance of rites and rituals, and it has developed secret rites (*tantra*) that had no place in the original teachings of the Buddha.

77. (Q) Does everyone have to become a Buddha in order to attain liberation?

(A) No. Everyone does not have to become a Buddha.

In the teachings of the Buddha, there are three modes of enlightenment, one of which an aspirant may choose, in accordance with his or her particular temperament — they are: (1) *sāvaka-bodhi*; (2) *pacceka-bodhi*; and (3) *sammā-sambodhi*.

Sāvaka-bodhi is the enlightenment of a disciple. This is known as the Arahats Path. He who aspires to become an Arahats usually seeks the guidance of a superior enlightened instructor. A slight indication from an understanding instructor would alone be sufficient for a spiritually advanced aspirant to progress on the upward path of enlightenment.

After achieving his goal, an Arahats devotes the remainder of his life to serving other seekers of peace by example and by precept. First, he purifies himself, and, then, he endeavors to help others achieve liberation by expounding to them the teachings that he himself has followed. An Arahats is more qualified to teach the Dhamma than ordinary worldly teachers, who have no realization of Truth, since he speaks from personal experience.

There is nothing selfish in the noble ideal of Arahatsip, for Arahatsip is gained only by eradicating all forms of selfishness. Self-illusion and egoism are some of the fetters that have to be discarded in order to attain Arahatsip. The wise men and women who lived at the time of the Buddha, and others later, benefited by the golden opportunity offered by Him to gain enlightenment in this present life itself.

Pacceka-bodhi is the independent enlightenment of a highly evolved person who achieves his goal by his own efforts without seeking any external aid. Such a holy person is termed a Pacceka (Private) Buddha because he lacks the power to purify and serve others by expounding the Dhamma that he himself discovered. Nevertheless, he teaches morality.

Pacceka Buddhas arise only during those periods when the teachings do not exist. Their number is not limited only to one at a particular time, as in the case of Sammā-Sambuddhas. Although the Buddha Gotama of the present era has passed away, we are

still living in a Buddha cycle, for the teachings still exist in their pristine purity. Therefore, no Pacceka Buddhas arise during this period.

Sammā-Sambodhi is the supreme enlightenment of a most developed, most compassionate, most loving, all-knowing perfect being. He who attains this type of enlightenment is called a *Sammā-Sambuddha*, literally, a “Fully Self-enlightened One”. He is so called because he not only comprehends the Dhamma by his own efforts and wisdom but also expounds the doctrine to seekers of truth to purify and save them from this ever-recurring cycle of birth and death. Unlike the Pacceka Buddhas, only one Supreme Buddha can arise at a particular time, just as, on certain trees, one flower alone can blossom.

He who aspires to attain *Sammā-Sambuddhahood* is called a *Bodhisattva*. The path of *Bodhisattvahood* is the most refined and the most beautiful ideal that could ever, in this ego-centric world, be conceived, for what is nobler than a life of service and purity?

Those who, in the course of their wanderings in the cycle of birth and death, wish to serve others and reach the ultimate perfection of a *Sammā-Sambuddha*, are free to pursue the *Bodhisattva* Path, but there is no compulsion that all must strive to attain Buddhahood, which, to say the least, is practically impossible.

78. (Q) Does Buddhism teach that man is reborn only upon our Earth?
(A) No. According to Buddhism, inhabited worlds are numberless; the world upon which a being is to have his or her next birth, as well as the nature of the rebirth itself, is decided by the preponderance of an individual’s merit or demerit. In other words, it will be controlled by his or her accumulated *kamma*.
79. (Q) Is there any scientific support for this doctrine?
(A) Yes. Cosmologists have recently begun identifying planets orbiting distant stars and have estimated that habitable planets number in the many billions in the Milky Way alone, not to mention other galaxies.
80. (Q) Has the Buddha summed up His whole teaching in a single verse?
(A) Yes.
81. (Q) What is that verse, and where can it be found in the scriptures?
(A) It occurs in the *Dhammapada*, verse 183; it is:

“Avoid all evil, cultivate the good, purify your mind: this sums up the teaching of the Buddhas.”
82. (Q) Does this verse have both active and passive qualities?
(A) Yes. To avoid all evil may be called a passive quality, since it is something we refrain from doing. However, to cultivate that which is good and to purify one’s mind are entirely active qualities. According to the Buddha, we should not merely avoid evil, but we should be actively good and earnestly strive to purify our minds.

The five precepts that lay practitioners are expected to follow as well as the disciplinary rules that govern the lives of Buddhist Monks and Nuns fall into the passive quality.

83. (Q) What are these five precepts that lay practitioners are expected to follow?

(A) They are:

1. I undertake the training rule to abstain from taking life;
2. I undertake the training rule to abstain from taking what is not freely given;
3. I undertake the training rule to abstain from sexual misconduct;
4. I undertake the training rule to abstain from false speech;
5. I undertake the training rule to abstain from intoxicating drinks and drugs causing heedlessness.

The purpose of these precepts is to bring physical and verbal actions under control.

84. (Q) What benefits are derived by observing these precepts?

(A) (1) A morally blameless life; (2) the accumulation of merit; and (3) a solid foundation for the practice of meditation.

85. (Q) Are there other observances which are considered meritorious for lay practitioners to undertake?

(A) Yes. There are the eight precepts; they are:

1. I undertake the training rule to abstain from taking life;
2. I undertake the training rule to abstain from taking what is not freely given;
3. I undertake the training rule to abstain from all sexual activity;
4. I undertake the training rule to abstain from false speech;
5. I undertake the training rule to abstain from intoxicating drinks and drugs causing heedlessness;
6. I undertake the training rule to abstain from eating any solid food after noon;
7. I undertake the training rule to abstain from dancing, singing, music, and unseemly shows; from the use of garlands, perfumes, and unguents; and from things that tend to beautify and adorn;
8. I undertake the training rule to abstain from high and luxurious beds and seats.

The first five precepts are identical to those listed above except that the third precept is changed to abstaining from all sexual activity.

86. (Q) What are the Three Refuges?

(A) (1) I go to the Buddha for refuge; (2) I go to the Dhamma for refuge; (3) I go to the Saṅgha for refuge.

87. (Q) What does this formula mean?

(A) Buddhists recite this formula to show their respect and gratitude to the Buddha, to His teaching (the Dhamma), and to the community of His enlightened disciples (the Saṅgha). Buddhists regard the Lord Buddha as the supreme teacher and try to emulate His example. They regard the teaching as containing the essential and immutable principles of justice and truth and thus being the path that leads to liberation from suffering. Finally, they regard the

community of His enlightened disciples as the teachers and expounders of the excellent Dhamma revealed by the Buddha.

88. (Q) What is the role of the Order of Monks and Nuns?

(A) Bound by a strict set of rules and regulations, Monks and Nuns have renounced the world so that they can devote their entire lives to study, practice, and service to others, while lay followers, guided by Buddhist principles, serve not only their religion but also their country and the world in their own way. The monastic life offers its members not only a blameless means of livelihood but also structure, discipline, tradition, and communal support.

89. (Q) How many disciplinary rules are Monks and Nuns expected to observe?

(A) For Buddhist Monks, the training in morality consists of the observance of 227 rules (in the Theravādin tradition), or 250 rules (in the Dharmaguptaka and Chinese traditions), or 253 rules (in the Mūlasarvāstavādin and Tibetan traditions), while Buddhist Nuns must follow an additional set of rules. These rules are arranged into eight categories:

1. Four rules leading to expulsion from the Order if broken:

- a. Sexual intercourse;
- b. Theft;
- c. Taking a human life or inducing another to commit suicide;
- d. Falsely boasting of supernormal powers.

2. Thirteen rules dealing with initial and subsequent meetings of the Order;

3. Two indefinite rules;

4. Thirty rules dealing with expiation and forfeiture;

5. Ninety-two rules dealing with expiation;

6. Four rules requiring confession;

7. Seventy-five rules dealing with etiquette and decorum;

8. Seven rules for the settlement of legal processes.

90. (Q) What types of activities are Monks and Nuns specifically prohibited from committing?

(A) They are required to abstain from: destroying the life of living beings, stealing, sexual intercourse, and falsely boasting of supernormal powers; the use of intoxicating drinks or drugs and eating after the noon meal; dancing, singing, music, and unseemly shows; from the use of garlands, perfumes, and unguents, and from things that tend to beautify and adorn; using high and luxurious beds and seats; receiving presents of gold, silver, raw grain and meat, women and maidens, slaves, cattle, elephants, etc.; false speech, malicious speech, harsh speech, and useless speech; reading and hearing fanciful stories and tales; carrying messages to and from lay people; buying and selling; cheating, bribery, deception, and fraud; imprisoning, plundering, and threatening others; and the practice of certain specific arts and sciences; etc.

91. (Q) What are the duties of Monks and Nuns to lay people?
 (A) In general, to set them an example of the highest morality; to expound the Dhamma to them; to provide them with instructions and guidance in meditation; to recite the *paritta* (comforting verses) to the sick and publicly in times of calamity or when requested to do so; and to exhort people to virtuous actions.
92. (Q) What, exactly, is the meaning of *kamma*?
 (A) *Kamma* means “volitional action”, specifically, the wholesome and unwholesome volitions and their concomitant mental factors, causing rebirth and shaping the destiny of beings. These *kamma* volitions become manifest as wholesome or unwholesome actions by body, speech, or mind. The term *kamma* does not apply to the consequence or result of mental or physical action — that is known as *vipāka*. Thus, *kamma* is the deed; *vipāka* is the result.
93. (Q) Can you give an example?
 (A) A wealthy person may spend large sums of money in building monasteries, in erecting statues of the Buddha, in sponsoring festivals and processions, in feeding Monks and Nuns, in giving alms to the poor, or in other public or charitable activities, and yet gain comparatively little merit, if all this is done for the mere sake of display and to garner praise for himself by others, or for any other selfish motive. But he who, whether rich or poor, does the least of these things with a kind or unselfish motive, or from the sense of a warm love for his fellow men, gains great merit. And those who approve of the good deeds done by others share in the merit, provided their sympathetic joy is genuine and not pretended.
94. (Q) In what books are the Buddha’s teachings recorded?
 (A) In the three collections of books called the *Tipiṭika*.
95. (Q) What are the names of these three collections?
 (A) (1) *Vinaya Piṭika*; (2) *Sutta Piṭika*; and (3) *Abhidhamma Piṭika*.
96. (Q) What does each set contain?
 (A) The *Vinaya Piṭika* contains the disciplinary rules governing the lives of Monks and Nuns; the *Sutta Piṭika* contains the instructive discourses delivered either by the Buddha Himself or by one of his chief disciples over the forty-five years of the Buddha’s teaching activity; and the *Abhidhamma Piṭika* contains the higher teaching.
97. (Q) Do Buddhists consider these books to be divinely inspired?
 (A) Absolutely not. The teachings contained in these books are based exclusively upon the Buddha’s own personal experience. Moreover, anyone can achieve what the Buddha achieved by putting these teachings into practice.
98. (Q) Do Buddhists believe that the Buddha can save others from the consequences of their sins?
 (A) Not at all. In the first place, the concept of “sin” does not even exist in Buddhism. Next, as the Buddha Himself declared: “By oneself is evil done; by oneself is one defiled.

By oneself is evil not done; by oneself is one purified. Everyone has the choice to be pure or impure. No one can purify another.” Also: “All the effort must be made by you; the Tathāgatas can only show the way.” Buddhists take personal responsibility for their own spiritual progress.

“Tathāgata” is the term the Buddha used when referring to Himself.

99. (Q) What, then, was the Buddha to us?
(A) An all-seeing, all-wise counsellor; one who discovered the safe path and pointed it out; one who discovered the cause of, and the only cure for, human suffering. In pointing to the path, in showing how to avoid dangers, He became our Guide. And, as one leading a blind man across a busy street saves his life, so, in showing us, who are blind from ignorance, the way to liberation, the Buddha may well be called our “Savior”.
100. (Q) Were all these points of doctrine discovered by the Buddha on the night He achieved enlightenment?
(A) Yes. These and many more that may be read in the Buddhist scriptures.
101. (Q) How long did the Buddha remain near the *bodhi*-tree?
(A) Forty-nine days.
102. (Q) What did He do then?
(A) He moved to another tree, where He decided, after meditating, to teach the Dhamma to all, without distinction of gender, caste, or race.
103. (Q) Who were His first disciples?
(A) The five ascetic companions who had abandoned Him when He stopped fasting and engaging in bodily mortifications: Koṇḍañña, Bhaddiya, Vappa, Mahānāma, and Assaji.
104. (Q) Where did He find them?
(A) In the Deer Park at Isipatana, near Vārāṇasī (Benares).
105. (Q) Did they readily listen to Him?
(A) They intended not to listen to Him inasmuch as they thought He had abandoned His quest and returned to a life of luxury. However, so compelling was the authority with which He spoke that all five were forced to pay close attention to what He had to say. Thereupon, He delivered His first discourse on the Dhamma to them.
106. (Q) What is this discourse called?
(A) Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, or “The Turning (or Establishment) of the Wheel of Truth.”
107. (Q) What effect did this discourse have upon the five ascetic companions?
(A) Koṇḍañña was the first to enter upon the path leading to Arahatsip. The others followed soon thereafter.

108. (Q) Who were the next converts?
(A) A rich young layman named Yasa and his father. Yasa attained Arahathship, while his father was the first lay convert. By the end of five months, the number of disciples had reached sixty persons.
109. (Q) What did the Buddha do at that time?
(A) He called His disciples together and sent them in various and opposite directions to expound the Dhamma. He Himself went to a town called Senānigāma, which was near Uruvelā.
110. (Q) After becoming Buddha, how long did He teach?
(A) Forty-five years. He achieved enlightenment when He was 35 years old, and He lived to be 80. During this time, He made a vast number of converts among all classes of people. Among His followers were some of the most learned men of the time.
111. (Q) What became of His former wife and His son?
(A) First His son Rāhula, and later His former wife Yasodharā, renounced the world and became followers of His doctrine, as did His stepmother, Queen Pajāpati Gotamī.
112. (Q) What became of His father, King Suddhodana?
(A) He accepted the doctrine as well and died an Arahath.
113. (Q) Did the Buddha travel around the country?
(A) During the eight dry months of the year, He went from city to city and from district to district, teaching the Dhamma to the people. During the four rainy months, He would remain in one place, giving special instructions to His disciples.
114. (Q) Do Buddhist Monks still follow this custom?
(A) Yes, many do.
115. (Q) Who were His chief disciples?
(A) There were two: Sāriputta and Moggallāna.
116. (Q) How do Buddhist Monks differ from the clergy of other religions?
(A) In other religions, clergy claim to be intercessors between God and men, to help obtain pardon for sins. They also act as interpreters and enforcers of the doctrines of their religion. Buddhism does not acknowledge the existence of a Creator God. Consequently, Buddhist Monks are not clergy. Rather, they are individuals who have voluntarily chosen to live their lives in accordance with the disciplinary rules laid down by the Buddha and to study and teach the Dhamma to others.
117. (Q) Did the Buddha endorse idol worship?
(A) He did not; He opposed it.

118. (Q) But do not Buddhists offer flowers and make reverence before the statue of the Buddha, His relics, and the monuments enshrining them?
(A) Yes, but not as idol worshipers.
119. (Q) What is the difference?
(A) Idol worshipers not only take the images to be visible representations of their God or Gods, but also consider that the idol contains, in its substance, the essence of their deity. Buddhists, on the other hand, pay reverence to statues of the Buddha and the like only as reminders of the greatest, wisest, most benevolent, and most compassionate man who ever lived. The Buddha is not conceived of or worshipped as a deity.
120. (Q) Are charms, incantations, the observance of lucky hours, fortune-telling, and devil-dancing a part of Buddhism?
(A) They are positively repugnant to its fundamental principles. Such customs are the surviving relics of shamanism and pantheistic and other pre-Buddhist religions.
121. (Q) What are the most noteworthy differences between Buddhism and other religions?
(A) Among other things, Buddhism teaches the highest good without a God; the rejection of the concept of a permanent “soul”; a happiness without a heaven; a liberation based upon one’s own efforts, and without rites, prayers, penances, intercessory priests or saints, or a vicarious savior; and a goal attainable in this life and this world.
122. (Q) Does popular Buddhism contain only what is true and in agreement with science?
(A) Like every other religion that has existed for many centuries, popular Buddhism contains cultural elements intermingled with the doctrines. Moreover, the assortment of these cultural elements varies from region to region. These cultural elements have nothing to do with the teachings of the Buddha.
123. (Q) Is Buddhism opposed to education and the study of science?
(A) Quite the contrary — in the *Sigālovāda Sutta*, a discourse delivered by the Buddha in the bamboo grove near Rājagaha, He specified as one of the duties of a teacher that he should give his students “instructions in every suitable art and science”.
124. (Q) Are there any dogmas in Buddhism which we are required to accept on faith?
(A) No. We are earnestly commanded to accept nothing whatsoever on faith, whether it is written in books, handed down from our ancestors, or taught by sages. The Buddha taught that we must not believe something merely because it is said; nor traditions because they have been handed down from generation to generation; nor rumors, as such; nor what is written in holy books; nor doctrines alleged to have been revealed by some deity; nor from inferences drawn from some haphazard assumption we may have made; nor on the mere authority of our teachers or masters. Instead, we are to believe something only when it has been corroborated by our own reasoning and personal experience.
125. (Q) Does Buddhism countenance hypocrisy?
(A) By no means. As the *Dhammapada* says (verses 51 and 52):

“Just as a lovely flower, full of color but lacking in fragrance, cannot give anyone the benefit of its scent, the well-spoken words of the Buddha are of no benefit to those who do not put the Dhamma into practice.

“Just as a lovely flower, full of both color and fragrance, will give the benefit of its scent to all, the well-spoken words of the Buddha will benefit those who put the Dhamma into practice.”

126. (Q) Does Buddhism teach us to return an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth?

(A) No. Buddhism does not condone such behavior. Again, as the *Dhammapada* says (verse 134):

“Do not retaliate. Be as silent as a cracked gong when you are abused by others. If you do so, I deem that you have already attained *nibbāna*, although you have not realized *nibbāna*.”

Also from the *Dhammapada* (verse 5):

“Returning hatred with hatred will never bring hatred to an end in this world; only by replacing hatred with love will hatred come to an end. This is an ancient and eternal law.”

127. (Q) Does Buddhism teach the immortality of the soul?

(A) Buddhism considers the concept of a “soul” to be a false idea. Since everything that exists is subject to change, then man is included, and every material part of him must change. That which is subject to change cannot be permanent. Thus, there is no permanent entity in man which can be called a “self” or “soul”.

128. (Q) If the idea of a “soul” is to be rejected, what is it in man which gives him the sense of having a permanent individuality?

(A) According to the Buddha’s teaching, our so-called “individual existence” is in reality nothing but a mere process of physical and mental phenomena, a process which, since time immemorial, was already going on before one’s apparent birth, and which, also after death, will continue for immemorial periods of time. It is the continuity of this ever-changing process, driven by craving, or the unsatisfied desire for existence, which gives the sense of having a permanent individuality.

129. (Q) What is it that is born?

(A) A new set of aggregates, or personality, caused by the yearnings of the dying person.

130. (Q) How many aggregates are there, and what are they?

(A) There are five aggregates; they are: (1) corporeality, body, or materiality; (2) feeling; (3) perception; (4) (predisposing) mental formations; and (5) consciousness. The words “individual”, “person”, “living being”, and “ego” are but modes of expression for these five aggregates. The Buddha did not teach the existence of an individual soul which exists apart from mind and body.

131. (Q) What is the cause for the differences in the combination of the five aggregates which make every individual different from every other individual?
 (A) The differences are due to the *kamma* of the individual in the immediately preceding birth.
132. (Q) What is the force or energy that is at work, under the guidance of *kamma*, to produce a new being?
 (A) Craving — the “will to live”.
133. (Q) Is the new set of aggregates, this new personality, the same being as that in the previous birth, whose craving has brought it into existence?
 (A) In one sense, it is a new being, in another, it is not. During this life, the aggregates are constantly changing, and, though the man of forty is the continuation of the youth of eighteen, yet, by the continual replacement of the cells in his body and change of mind and character, he is a different being. Nevertheless, the man in his old age justly reaps the reward or suffering consequent upon his thoughts and actions at every previous stage of his life. In like manner, the new being of a fresh rebirth, being a continuation of the same individuality as before, but with a new set of aggregates, justly reaps the consequences of his thoughts and actions in the previous existence.
134. (Q) But the aged man remembers many of the incidents of his youth, despite being physically and mentally changed; why, then, is not the recollection of past lives brought over by us from our last birth into the present birth?
 (A) Since memory is included in the aggregates, and since the aggregates have changed with the new existence, a new memory, the record of the new existence, develops. Yet, the record or reflection of past lives must survive, for when Prince Siddhattha became Buddha, the full sequence of His previous births were seen by Him. If His previous existences had left no trace behind, He could not have done this, since there would have been nothing for Him to see. Moreover, anyone who develops the fine-material absorptions can trace the line of his previous lives.

The absorptions are states of deep mental unification that result from the centering of the mind upon a single object with such power of attention that a total immersion in the object takes place.

135. (Q) What are the particulars of the passing of the Buddha?
 (A) After the Buddha had trained learned, well-disciplined followers and His mission was fulfilled, at the age of eighty, with a group of Monks, He set out on His last journey, from Rājagaha toward the north. As usual, He passed in leisurely fashion through cities, towns, and villages, teaching the people on His way and stopping wherever He wished.
- In due course, He arrived at Vesālī, the capital city of the Licchavis. The Buddha spent that rainy season not in the park in Vesālī, which had just been donated to Him by Ambapālī, the celebrated courtesan of that city, but in the adjoining village. There, the Buddha became seriously ill. He thought, however, that it was not right for Him to die without preparing His disciples, who were dear to Him. Thus, with courage, determination,

and will, He bore all His pains, got the better of His illness, and recovered; but His health was still poor.

After the Buddha's recovery, Ānanda, His most devoted attendant, went to his beloved Master and said: "Lord, I have looked after the health of the Blessed One. I have looked after Him in His illness. But at the sight of His illness, the horizon became dim to me, and my faculties were no longer clear. Yet there was one little consolation: I thought the Blessed One would not pass away until He had left instructions concerning the Order of the Saṅgha". The Buddha, full of compassion and feeling, replied:

"Ānanda, what does the Order of the Saṅgha expect from Me? I have taught the Dhamma without making any distinction as to exoteric and esoteric. With regard to the truth, the Tathāgata has nothing like the closed fist of a teacher who keeps something back. Surely, Ānanda, if there is anyone who thinks that he will lead the Saṅgha and that the Saṅgha should depend on him, let him set down his instructions. But the Tathāgata has no such idea. Why should He then leave instructions concerning the Saṅgha? I am old now, Ānanda... As a worn-out cart has to be kept going by repairs, so, it seems to Me, the body of the Tathāgata can only be kept going by repairs... Therefore, Ānanda, dwell by making yourselves your island, making yourselves, not anyone else, your refuge; making the Dhamma your island, the Dhamma your refuge, nothing else your refuge."

Later, the Buddha told Ānanda that He would die in three months and asked Ānanda to assemble in the hall at Mahāvana all the Monks who were at that time residing in the neighborhood of Vesālī. At this meeting, the Buddha advised the Monks to follow what He had taught them and to spread it abroad for the good of the many, out of compassion for the world. He then announced that He would die in three months. Leaving Vesālī, the Buddha gazed at the city in which He had stayed on many occasions and said: "This will be the last time, Ānanda, that the Tathāgata will behold Vesālī. Come, Ānanda, let us proceed".

Stopping at several villages and townships, the Buddha eventually arrived at Pāvā and stayed in the park of Cunda the goldsmith, who was already one of His devoted followers. At Cunda's invitation, the Buddha and the Monks went to his house for a meal. Cunda had prepared, besides various delicacies, a dish called *sūkara-maddava*. This is interpreted in the ancient commentaries in several ways: (1) as pork (this is generally accepted); (2) as bamboo sprouts trodden by pigs; (3) as a kind of mushroom growing in a spot trodden by pigs; (4) as a rice pudding rich with the essence of milk; or (5) as a special preparation intended by Cunda to prolong the Buddha's life. Whatever it might have been, the Buddha asked Cunda to serve Him with *sūkara-maddava* and to serve the Monks other dishes. At the end of the meal, the Buddha requested Cunda to bury in a hole whatever was left of the *sūkara-maddava*, saying that only a Tathāgata would be able to digest it. This was the Buddha's last meal. After it, the Buddha became sick and suffered violent pains but bore them without complaint. He set out for Kusinārā, accompanied by Ānanda and other Monks. Explaining that He was tired, He stopped and rested in two places.

In due time, the Buddha arrived at Kusinārā toward evening, and, on a couch between two sal trees in the sal grove of the Mallas, He "laid Himself down on His right side, with one leg resting on the other, mindful and self-possessed". This was the full-

moon day of the month of Vesākha (May). Ānanda asked the Buddha what they should do with His remains. He told Ānanda they should not occupy themselves with honoring the remains of the Tathāgata but should rather be zealous in their own spiritual development. The lay devotees, He said, would take care of the remains.

Ānanda left the immediate area and cried out: “My Master is about to pass away from me — He who is so kind to me”. The Buddha inquired where Ānanda was and, on being told that he was weeping, called to him and said: “No, Ānanda, do not weep. Have I not already told you that separation from all that is near and dear to us is inevitable? Whatever is born, produced, conditioned, contains within itself the nature of its own dissolution. It cannot be otherwise”. Then, the Master spoke to the Monks in praise of Ānanda’s wonderful qualities and abilities. The Mallas, in whose realm Kusinārā was located, came with their families to pay homage to the Blessed One. A wandering ascetic named Subhadda asked for permission to see the Buddha, but Ānanda refused, saying that the Blessed One was tired and that He should not be troubled. The Buddha, overhearing the conversation, called Ānanda and asked him to allow Subhadda to see Him. After an interview with the Buddha, Subhadda joined the Order the same night, thus becoming His last direct disciple.

After addressing Ānanda and advising him that, if the Saṅgha wishes it, they can abolish the lesser and minor disciplinary rules, the Buddha next addressed the Monks and requested them three times to ask Him if they had any doubt or question that they wished clarified, but they all remained silent. The Buddha then addressed the Monks: “Impermanent are all compound things. Work out your own liberation with diligence”. These were the last words of the Tathāgata. A week later, His body was cremated by the Mallas in Kusinārā. A dispute over the relics of the Buddha arose between the Mallas and the delegates of rulers of several kingdoms, such as Magadha, Vesālī, and Kapilavatthu. It was settled by a venerable old Brahmin named Dona on the basis that they should not quarrel over the relics of one who preached peace. With common consent, the relics were then divided into eight portions to the satisfaction of all. Stūpas were built over these relics, and feasts were held commemorating the Buddha.

136. (Q) Did the Buddha write down His doctrine in books?

(A) No — it was not the Indian custom to do so. During the forty-five years of His teaching, He developed His doctrine in all the minute details. He recited it to His disciples, who committed it to memory, word by word. But, inasmuch as there was no prohibition against committing the doctrine to writing, it appears from the Dhātu Vibhaṅga Sutta that King Bimbisāra had the chief points inscribed on golden leaves. Three months following the passing of the Buddha, a council consisting of five hundred Arahats, under the direction of Mahā Kassapa, one of the Buddha’s greatest disciples, was held to codify the disciplinary rules and doctrines. It was probably at the time of the third council (around 240 BCE), held under the patronage of the great Indian ruler Asoka, that the Pāli Canon was first put into writing. Then, around 83 BCE, during the reign of the pious Śrī Lankan King Vaṭṭa Gāmaṇi Abhaya (104—77 BCE), a Council of Arahats was held, and the entire *Tipiṭaka* was committed to writing at Aluvihāra in Śrī Lanka.

137. (Q) Who was King Asoka?
(A) King of Magadha and the most powerful monarch of his time in Asia. He ruled from 272 to 236 BCE. He was converted to Buddhism in the tenth year of his reign and became most devoted to its spread throughout the world.
138. (Q) What did he do for Buddhism?
(A) He built stūpas and monasteries, established parks and hospitals, not only for men but also for animals, and encouraged all his subjects to observe the moral precepts of the Buddha. After the third council, he sent missionaries to carry Buddhism to many different countries, and he sent ambassadors to four Greek kings to inform them about the Buddha's teachings. To keep the doctrine pure, he established the office of Minister of Justice and Religion in his own realm. He also appointed officials to promote the education of women in the principles of Buddhism.
139. (Q) What tangible proof is there of all this?
(A) The edicts of King Asoka have been discovered engraved on rocks and stone pillars in various parts of India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. These edicts have been translated into English.
140. (Q) In what light do these edicts make Buddhism appear?
(A) As a religion of noble tolerance, of universal brotherhood, of righteousness and justice. They have done much to win for it the respect in which it is now held throughout the world.
141. (Q) When was Buddhism introduced into Śrī Lanka?
(A) Buddhism was brought to Śrī Lanka around 250 BCE by Mahinda, King Asoka's eldest son, who had become a Monk. The King of Śrī Lanka at the time, Devānam Piya Tissa, received Venerable Mahinda and the six Monks accompanying him with great favor, became a convert himself, and built the "great monastery" Mahāvihāra in the capital city Anurādhapura. Mahinda also arranged for a sapling of the *bodhi*-tree to be brought to Śrī Lanka. This tree is still in existence. It is considered to be the oldest historical tree in the world. Mahinda died in Śrī Lanka at the age of eighty. Mahinda's sister, Saṅghamittā, who had also entered the Order, came to Śrī Lanka sometime later with a party of Buddhist Nuns and instructed many Śrī Lankan women in the teachings of the Buddha.